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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

14 August 1970

MEMORANDUM TO THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Soviet Aims in the Middle East -- Plan or Improvisation*

1. In the relatively short span of fifteen years, the Russians have acquired a powerful position in the Middle East. Though there have been ebbs and flows, the record for this period as a whole is one of very substantial progress. How much of this progress is due to steadiness of purpose? Have the Russians had throughout a consistent design and, if so, what is its nature? What does the pattern of Soviet conduct imply for the further course of Soviet policy in the area?

2. We do not think that Soviet policy in the Middle East has simply been a case of "playing-it-by-ear." There is a design -- broadly strategic in nature -- aimed at

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accomplishing objectives inherent in the USSR's role both as a great power and as a self-proclaimed revolutionary power. On the strategic plane, Moscow hopes to increase its own and to diminish Western influence in the region and to encourage the emergence of political forces willing to make the states of the area clients of the USSR.

3. This is not to say, however, that Moscow has been working from a timetable and that each of its moves has been carefully plotted in advance. Indeed, since the play of forces and the development of events in the area have perforce not been susceptible to close management by the Soviets, a detailed program of action would have robbed them of much of their tactical flexibility. As it is, within the broad strategic framework there has been a strong tactical emphasis in Soviet policy. And, in the Middle East, Soviet action has been greatly influenced by such things as the play of politics within the Soviet leadership, economic stringencies and military limitations, possible conflicts with foreign policy interests elsewhere, and, of course, by the unpredictability of the various actors on the Middle East scene.

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For all these reasons, the Russians have proceeded by fits and starts, taking advantage of opportunities which they did not create, achieving immediate objectives as they went along, suffering occasional setbacks, and profiting from the mistakes and misfortunes of others.

The Origins of the Soviet Middle East Involvement

4. At the end of World War II, Stalin pressed hard on Iran and Turkey and tried to get a share of former Italian colonies west of Egypt, but was thwarted. Neither he nor his successors seem to have realized for a long time the advantages they might gain from the establishment of Israel, the close relationship between that country and the US, and the hostility to the US which that relationship would produce among the Arabs. Stalin's successors, in undertaking an extensive reexamination of the assumptions which underlay his policies, did come to recognize, however, ^{the} futility of nearly exclusive reliance on indigenous Communist parties as well as the opportunities that lay in cultivating the post-colonial regimes and the anti-Western forces in the developing world.

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5. When, in 1955, the USSR made the first move to establish itself as arms supplier to the Arab states it was fulfilling a geopolitical design of long standing: to assert Russia's status as a Mediterranean power. Its immediate objective was, however, more limited, namely, to break through the ring of alliances which the Western powers had constructed along its southern periphery. The circumstances which made this possible were not of Moscow's making. Indeed, the Soviets had for some time previously deprecated and contested those nationalist, anti-colonialist Arab regimes with which they now began to ally themselves. Even then, though they correctly perceived that anti-Western trends in the area could be turned to their advantage, they conceived of their link up with them as part of a broader strategy embracing the Third World as a whole. Outside the Middle East this strategy has borne little fruit. To this extent the Soviet design has been unfulfilled and the expectations to which it gave rise have had to be altered.

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6. At several crucial junctures in the intervening years, Moscow's role in the area has been heavily affected by unforeseen events, most notably by the war of 1967, which was surely no part of a Soviet general design. An important result of the Arabs' defeat was, nevertheless, an opportunity to accelerate the pace of Soviet political and military penetration of the area. The USSR has established itself more firmly as the bulwark of the radical Arab cause and, since the war, has found new avenues opening up to it, as, for instance, in South Yemen, the Sudan, and, to a lesser extent, Libya. It can consider accomplished its objective of becoming a major political and military factor in the region. The eventual goal of excluding Western influence altogether may now seem much more realizable.

7. It is very much to be doubted, however, that the Russians, fifteen years ago, had even the grossest notion that their entry on the scene would eventually draw them so deeply into the Arab-Israeli conflict, opening up not only greater possibilities but also larger problems and risks than they had foreseen. At the same time, as the static

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has gone up, so has the need to protect it, and in the prevailing circumstances this means that the Russians are to a degree at the mercy of frequently mercurial events. This was evidently the case last January, when the Russians made the decision to extend their military commitment in the UAR in a substantial way -- not, we believe, a long-meditated and deliberate decision but one forced on them by the Israeli air raids deep into the UAR.

8. Be this as it may, the Russians did move to the higher level of risk that goes with direct military involvement in order to protect their position. It remains true that Moscow has many more vital interests to guard elsewhere, e.g., in Europe, with respect to China, and in SAIR. We think it true also that, for all the boldness of its recent military moves, Moscow will consciously seek to steer clear of an irreversible military commitment. And, while Moscow's prompt and far-reaching reaction in January was hardly the typical reaction of a timid and conservative bureaucratic regime, the reflexes which stem from the prevailing system of collective leadership undoubtedly continue to impose

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constraints on the USSR's conduct abroad. Such considerations as these provide, however, only a general frame of reference for gauging likely Soviet responses, at most. And they may be increasingly offset by the ever-growing engagement of Soviet prestige and by the momentum of military developments on the spot.

Soviet Tactical Aim at the Present Stage

9. The Russians seem not only to have sanctioned Nasser's response to the US Middle East initiative but to have actively encouraged him to reply as he did. This tells us something about Soviet intentions at the present stage, but only so much. It suggests that the Russians, though they have only recently raised the level of their own military involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, have not thrown prudence to the winds. If, in order to keep the pace and scope of engagement within manageable bounds, they have decided to shift the emphasis from military to political means, they would surely see an advantage in doing so at a time when they and their clients are in as good a military position as they have had at any time since the 1967 war, and have also succeeded in arousing concern in both the US and Israel.

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10. In view of the USSR's forwardness in recent months, its readiness to help promote a ceasefire between the Arabs and Israel is surely suspect. It may be, as some suppose, that the Soviet aim is simply to obtain a breathing space to be used to consolidate the Soviet and UAR military position vis-a-vis Israel and that the ending of the respite will see a resumption and intensification of military pressures on Israel. An important test of Soviet intentions in this respect will be whether they are willing to work for an extension of the ceasefire beyond its initial three-month term. The Russians must, at the very least, have considered the possibility that the discussions now beginning will lead nowhere and that the ceasefire will break down; it is reasonable to assume that they have given Nasser assurances of continued strong military backing should this happen. It is another matter to suppose that the Russians are counting on this happening or have planned it that way, although it would appear that neither their political nor military positions will be any the worse if it does.

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11. It seems more likely that the Soviets are feeling their way along at this point. Supposing this to be the case, they will certainly be attempting to discover whether, in the changed circumstances, Israel will at US urging begin to abandon some of its demands in connection with a settlement. Indeed, by accepting the Rogers initiative, the Israelis have already come closer than ever before to committing themselves to withdrawal from occupied Arab territories, a goal long sought by the Russians and their Arab friends.

12. It is probable that the Russians themselves are not entirely sure how events are likely to unfold beyond this point and precisely where their advantage lies. They have benefited greatly from the Arab-Israeli conflict. They would probably be loath to see its liquidation or even such a cooling of animosities as would give the US some chance of recouping its position with the Arab states. It is difficult to believe that the Russians can or would press the Arab parties to accept the conditions for a settlement Israel is likely to put forward initially.

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[REDACTED] In contemplating such a course, Moscow would have to reckon with the damage that could be done to its relations not only with the UAR, but with such others as Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and the fedayeen movement which it has made some effort to cultivate. Thus, even if Moscow is seriously interested in going down the path of diplomatic negotiation, its movement can be expected to be hesitant and guarded.

13. We think, nonetheless, that Moscow may regard this as the preferred path. It may believe that it has wrung all the benefits it safely can for the present from its military commitment. While it might be tempted to press ahead on the military line in the belief that the US will be unable to find an effective response and that it can deal the US a quick and decisive strategic reverse, it must consider the real possibility that such a venture would get out of control and bring on an international crisis which might, at a minimum, cause disruptions in Soviet domestic policies and on-going diplomacy in other spheres.

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14. The Russians may suppose that by playing for time they can avoid this hazard, while by careful management remaining secure in their alliance with the radical Arab states. A settlement, if it were obtainable on tolerable terms, would in addition offer the Russians the economic and strategic rewards which would come from the reopening of the Suez Canal. And it may be that the Russians also have a notion that, in more peaceful conditions, they could more effectively influence the direction of economic and social change in the Arab states and in that way create a firmer base for their own position in the area for the long term.

15. If it should turn out that the ceasefire can be maintained and a period of negotiation sets in, it is probable that the Russians will proceed with both a maximum and a minimum objective in mind. From their point of view, the best that could be had from negotiations is a settlement which would return the occupied territories to the Arabs and meet Arab demands with respect to Palestinian refugees. It would be brought home to the Arab states, of course, that this result was largely due

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to the military and political support given them by the USSR. But such an outcome will obviously not be easy to obtain nor is it likely to come quickly. Realizing this, the Russians may be willing to make do with something less: a protracted negotiation which, while checking the danger of further military escalation, might produce an erosion of support within Israel and on the part of the US for Israel's present bargaining position. If, on the other hand, the ceasefire breaks down, the Soviets can be expected to seek ways to apply renewed politico-military pressures on the Israelis.

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16. However they may play the tactics of the period immediately ahead, it is certain that longer-range calculations will figure in Soviet conduct. These will focus on the aim of consolidating the remarkable advance which Soviet influence has made in the Middle East over the last 15 years, and on preparing the way for a still further diminution of the Western role there. It seems altogether likely that Moscow has come to regard this region as one of the principal theaters, second only to Europe, in which its contest with

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Western power will be waged. In this sense it has a conscious design of policy for the area, even though its tactics will necessarily remain flexible.

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